

Anger builds among New York transit workers against sellout contract

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21 April 2014

After more than two years without a new contract covering New York City's 34,000 bus and subway workers, a tentative deal was announced last Thursday. Governor Andrew

Cuomo made the announcement at his Manhattan office, with the chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the president of the city's transit union, Local 100 of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), by his side.

The deal has an economic and political significance that goes beyond the city's transit workforce. It calls for a retroactive 1 percent hike for 2012 and another 1 percent for 2013; and then 2 percent for 2014, 2 percent for 2015 and 2 percent for 2016. Compounded, this adds up to an 8.25 percent increase over 5 years, which is below even a low projected rate of inflation. Since this is also compounded every year, the 8.25 figure amounts to a cut in real wages.

Although the memorandum of agreement has not yet been made public, there are two other significant concessions that have been revealed. One involves an increase in employees' contribution for health benefits from 1.5 percent to 2 percent of their wages, alongside a small increase in such benefits, obviously designed to make the concession more palatable. In addition it will take new employees five years instead of the current three years to reach top pay. This type of provision, often called sacrificing the "unborn"—those workers who have not yet been hired—has been a standard practice of the TWU leadership in recent years.

MTA chairman Thomas Prendergast has refused to put a dollar amount on the contract, except to say that it will not force the agency to raise fares above the already scheduled 4 percent hikes scheduled to take effect in 2015 and once again in 2017.

Some observers have claimed that the agency's fiscal future has improved because of higher revenues that the MTA has been getting from real estate taxes, as well as an increased ridership. However, this ignores the other side of the fiscal picture, the MTA's more than \$32 billion long-term bond debt, which is expected to rise in the coming years.

Despite the fact that Prendergast was appointed by Cuomo and would do nothing without the governor's approval, Local 100 president John Samuelsen sent Cuomo an open letter just before the agreement was announced, gushing with praise of the governor's leadership, while urging him to "personally intervene to bring an end to the protracted dispute.... Absent your intervention, I do not see a path to resolving a number of difficult issues."

Samuelsen's letter makes reference to Cuomo's alleged successful intervention that led to an end to ConEd's 2012 lockout of utility workers, without mentioning the major concessions that were part of the final package.

The union's move was part of a staged performance, in which the union boosts Cuomo's plans for reelection later this year while the union bureaucrats obtain a deal falsely heralded as a "victory."

There are already indications that few transit workers are buying this story, however. Cuomo is widely hated amongst workers for handing over tax cuts to the rich while imposing austerity contracts on government employees. In his first year in office, the governor, in collaboration with two state civil service unions, forced the rank and file to accept a three-year wage freeze by threatening them with layoffs. The governor has just completed a state budget deal that amounts to a vicious attack on New York City's public schools.

The new contract is bound up with much more than Cuomo's reelection. It will negatively impact 5,600 workers on the Long Island Railroad (LIRR), which carries passengers through Long Island and connects with New York City, and is part of the MTA. These workers have been without a new contract since June 2010 (see "Rejecting mediator's proposal, New York transit agency insists on a wage freeze," February 18, 2014).

Since the LIRR is a commuter line coming under federal regulations, President Barack Obama selected a panel of mediators, which recommended a contract in February of this year that has been calculated to amount to about 16 percent in wage increases over six years. The MTA rejected this recommendation, claiming that it would bust its budget.

This made it possible for the 60 craft unions to legally call a strike on March 21. However, the MTA, as authorized under the federal Railway Act, called for a "cooling off" period, requiring another panel to make a recommendation and postponing the threat of a legal strike until July 19. Usually, the findings of a second panel will not differ very much from the findings of the first panel. However, now it will be able to consider the TWU settlement, which is significantly less than what had been recommended for the LIRR workers.

In other words, Samuelsen, who in March vowed to support the LIRR unions "in every possible way," has now effectively stabbed those workers in the back. This will now make it easier for the MTA to impose a lower wage hike on its LIRR employees.

The settlement also helps New York City's Democratic mayor,

Bill de Blasio, to establish an absolute wage and benefit ceiling for city employees. The 300,000 city workers who have been working for many years without new agreements face the threat of contracts that leave them further behind in living standards, worsening the inequality that the “progressive” de Blasio promised to fight when he campaigned for office.

Samuelsen rose to the presidency as a member of the so-called dissident slate calling itself New Directions. Indeed, he was associated with the pseudo-left faction of this group, whose prime aim is to cover up the political issues and oppose the political independence of the working class. The role of these elements was revealed most clearly when the Local 100 executive board voted overwhelmingly to endorse Obama for the presidency. They have now negotiated the kind of concessions deal they claimed to oppose in the past.

The tentative deal now goes to the membership for a vote. The last time transit workers had an opportunity to vote on a contract agreement was in 2006, in the aftermath of the three-day strike that took place in December 2005.

That strike was illegal under New York State’s reactionary anti-strike Taylor Law. As a result, the union was fined \$2.5 million, the then-union president was sent to jail for a number of days, and all strikers lost two days’ pay for every day on strike. Nevertheless, to the surprise of some, the proposed contract was again voted down, by a slim margin. As a result, the dispute ended up in binding arbitration, which essentially mandated the same agreement that the workers had rejected.

WSWS reporters spoke to transit workers about the tentative agreement. Many workers had not heard very much or anything at all about it. However, many had heard enough to conclude they didn’t like it.

Maurice Francis, a train operator with seven years’ service, told the WSWS, “Look at the cost of living. The 1 percent, 1 percent, 2 percent, 2 percent raises just don’t add up. The average wage increase is about 3 or 4 percent across the country. This is way less than the raises nationwide. We don’t keep up with the cost of living.

“This is a big plot to destroy union wages nationwide. While this is going on, union leaders are acting like politicians, and you can’t trust politicians. They promise you something one day, but they never deliver anything.”

John Bates, a train operator for 17 years, commented: “It’s backwards. They give us the lowest percentage wage increase first so we get less. The highest increase should be first, so we get it now. But neither the high nor the low increase percentages match inflation.”

Chris Graves, a conductor with 22 years on the job, criticized the timing. “At least we should wait to see what happens to the LIRR. They got a 3 percent arbitration award for six years, and a strike deadline in July. We should wait at least until something happens with them, and base our action on what happens there.

“I don’t see how this happened so suddenly here. There was no information about any meetings, any bargaining or any back-and-forth. What led up to this agreement? Why now? A notice has just been posted in the crew room for a rally. It is in May. Now it will be used to support the contract.”

Andrew Maddis was discussing the contract with a co-worker. The train operator emphasized to the WSWS, “The contract is terrible. I don’t like it at all. We haven’t had a contract since 2012. One day Samuelsen writes a letter to Cuomo, and the next day there is a contract. Something strange is going on. All this time working without a contract has been a waste.”

Dave was outraged by the MTA deal brokered by Governor Cuomo. He explained, “It is a horrible deal. It doesn’t keep pace with the cost of inflation. Samuelsen looks weak. The LIRR could strike as early as July. If this deal is ratified by us, it will pull all the steam out of their engine. Nicole Gelinas of the anti-union Manhattan Institute writing about the Samuelsen-Cuomo press conference on page 23 of today’s *Post*, ‘There was no question who the alpha male was there. It was Cuomo.’ Mike Quill must be rolling over in his grave.

“Samuelsen has not kept his pledges. He talks a good game. He talks like he is carrying a big stick, but all he carries is a #2 pencil. I’m against this and will campaign to see it is defeated. This is a Cuomo collaborationist contract. That is what we will call it.

“I’m not a leftist. I’m a middle-of-the-road guy. I’m not a leftist or a rightist. But this deal stinks to high heaven. And there are a lot of transit workers across the board who think the same way.

“The only way we can win is we have to stick together. A lot of people are tired of what has been happening to working people across the country. We have to defeat this tentative proposal, and we have to stand together. Working people have to stand together. This contract is horrendous. It is a defeat for all workers. By standing together we can stop this contract.”

The opposition of transit workers raises several crucial issues. Firstly, the role of the unions is not to unite the working class but rather to keep workers divided. TWU Local 100 has a consistent record of helping to isolate workers in struggle. This is what happened with the Verizon strike, the Con Ed locout, the strike of school bus workers last year, and now the cynical betrayal of the LIRR workers.

Behind this treachery is the alliance of the unions with the Democratic Party and their support for the rule of big business. Transit workers and other city workers can establish a genuine unity only through fighting for rank and file committees independent of the union apparatus. At the same time this raises the urgent need for a political perspective, a break with both parties of Wall Street and the corporate establishment, in order to fight for socialist policies.



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